



## Folklores and Folktales in History Writing: An Analytical Study

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### ABSTRACT

*A controversial but crucial role in historical studies is played by folklore and folktales, especially in those historical settings where other sources of information are limited, scarce, and often rendered from an external perspective. This paper critically engages folklore, folktales, and historical studies in general in relation to the overarching controversies in historiographical studies and the methodology of historical studies. It begins with an exploration of new conceptual frameworks in historical and historiographical studies and continues with an explanation of folklore and folktales as a cultural phenomenon deposited within a cultural memory in general. This paper argues with an illustrative case and critical justification that, after rigorous validation, both folktales and folklore can further function as source materials in historical construction and can disclose, among other things, the social and power relations of past societies through their belief systems and experiences in general. At the same time, it identifies the methodological problems in writing history using folklore, some of which deal with chronology, symbolism, exaggeration, and reinterpretations. The conclusion reached is that folklore should neither be rejected as fantasy nor be considered uncritically true history; rather, it should be approached as an auxiliary and interpretive source which enhances understanding of history, especially relating to the history of marginal and illiterate groups.*



This study tries to figure out the significance and challenges of using folklores and folktales in history writings. Folklores and folktales often depict the cultural values and traditions of a society. Folktales and folklores can prove significant as it provides political and cultural insights. Some scholars consider it a reliable source and some do not. It has also some challenge like reliability on oral history and facts told by it.

## **History and Historiography**

History is a broad subject and it has different meanings and definitions. Scholars defines history in different ways. Will Durant defines history as “History is a narrative of what civilized men have thought or done in past time (Chatterjee, 2020).” According to Prof. A.L. Rowse, “History is essentially the record of the life of men in societies in their geographical and their Physical environment. Their social and cultural environment arises from the interaction of the one with the other, the society and its geographical condition (Chatterjee, 2020).” History arises when communities, or outstanding individuals within the community, enter into a continuous reflection on events happening within their surroundings that involve them either directly or indirectly, a process that scholars such as Pierre Nora (1989) refer to as the passing from lived memory into conscious historical record. Consequently, they find ways of ensuring that such events remain in public memory and sometimes interpret what such events mean. None of these contexts demands any relation between history and learning or academic study. History writing is a revolutionary activity in that it plays the crucial role, as pointed out by Marc Bloch (1953), of helping societies make sense of the condition of their present. History writing has gradually adopted different dimensions and standards over time. As an area of learning, historiography is decidedly more specialized and elitist, even though it is essentially a derivative of the concept of history that is, the study of how history has been and is written (Tosh, 1984). In broad terms, the term historiography refers to the “art of writing history.” More specifically, the practice of history writing that is, based on the sources’ critical study, the choosing of details from authentic materials within those sources, and the putting together of such details in a narrative that survives stringent examination is historiography “the principles, theories, and history of historical writing” (Breisach, 2007). The word historiography covers theory and background of historical writing.

For writing history historian used three types of sources to investigate the facts events Primary, Secondary and tertiary. Historian can get help from the autobiographies, personal letters, speeches, chronicles, official documents. In the 17<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> century historian acknowledged that government documents are the worthy sources history (Sulehri). Agreements, treaties, pamphlets bills, Acts are all the authentic sources of history. And lastly the oral history which passed through the generations orally by their forefathers. Oral tradition of history includes Folklores and folktales which provide the stories of heroes and an insight to the culture of a particular tribe. To write the people’s history folklore can be a source for the historian.

## **Folklore and Folktales**

Oral history and folklore play a crucial role in defining every region's culture. Folklore is unofficial knowledge of the world, its rules, taboos, customs, beliefs, folkways, language, music, dance, symbols, maxims, and signs. The study of folklores provides the necessary foundation by charting the social, cultural, and historical advancements of any civilization in order to comprehend the identities and beliefs of that region. Folklores are such unwritten, oral traditions that have been accepted by society for a long time. Every piece of folklore shares the same fundamental concept: tradition is something that is passed down orally or via practice rather than being recorded in writing. It involves the dances, songs, tales, Legends, and traditions, the beliefs and Superstitions, and the proverbial sayings of Peoples everywhere. It also covers studies of traditions, customs, domestic and agricultural practices from the past, as well as many kinds of structures and implements (Leach, 1996).

A folktale is a story that is passed down orally from person to person, typically among those who are illiterate, though this isn't always the case. In academic world stories are also transmitted from

man to man about such famous figures as the Punjabi hero Dullah Bhatthi. Folktales can be considered a part of folklore (Dawkins, 1951).

### **Folktales and Folklores as a Source of History**

Folklore can be a reliable source of history is a debatable topic. Different authors see differently the connection of folk lore and history. The viewpoint on folklore is presented by cultural historian Philip Jordan. Jordan asserts that anyone who wishes to better understand history would benefit greatly from having a solid understanding of oral tradition (Sulehri). The national experience shapes folklore. There was a belief that historical figures appeared in old folklore. Folklorists have long been influenced by the idea that history and folklore are inextricably linked. Biren Dutta, a well-known folklorist in the area, claims that even if folklore is no longer regarded as a historical science (Datta, 2002), he nevertheless recognizes its connection to history by referring to two schools of folkloristics as "historical." First, scholars in Europe and America used the Historical-Geographical School as their most important theoretical and methodological framework when analysing folklore data. It is founded on the diffusionist idea, which holds that just like cultural features, folklore items have their initial origins in a specific location and spread to other locations through the process of diffusion. They search for the actual item's place of origin using this method. The second was the Historical-Reconstruction School, which sought to "recapture disappeared historical periods for which other evidence is not available (Datta, 2002). According to Dutta, the theories of evolutionism and evolutionism are connected to both schools. Both educational institutions made an effort to rebuild prehistory and history (Deka, 2011).

Arthur L. Campa takes history and folklore as parallel. He describes the similarities and flaws of both. The storyteller's role in early human culture was similar to that of the historian in modern times: to preserve the past by recounting historical events. The goal of historians is to simplify history to the accumulation of facts. Even Nevertheless, folklore has a different nature and is less concerned with facts. If we may expand on this idea, historical facts aren't supposed to change once they've been established. However, each time a story is told or a song is sung by a different individual, the facts of folklore are altered. Folklore is a living organism that is passed down through tradition and perishes when it becomes static, however some folklore collectors insist on keeping the "original" and "authentic" folklore intact and unadorned like a linguistic museum piece. This is not possible and should not be done. Subjectivity, which is challenging to avoid, is another issue the historian is concerned with. Folklore allows the storyteller to use all of his subjective abilities to craft a compelling tale. In other words, subjectivity is promoted in folklorists, whereas it is not meant to exist in historians (Campa, 1965).

However, he did not criticize folklore for history as he wrote Folklore, or more particularly a legend, typically starts with an event's occurrence and is then strengthened and embellished during the transmission process to the point where it is accepted as reality. Actually, this procedure functions as a kind of aid to history. How many people today actually know the truth about Lincoln, Washington, or any other famous historical figures? But through tales attached to them, they are aware of such persons. Weirdly, the process has been inverted, and the market is flooded with "biographies" or histories of well-known and infamous figures whose authors primarily rely on sources that a folklorist and a historian would both refer to as legendary (Campa, 1965).

Then the author Henry Glassie stands against the point that folklore can be true and source of history. He wrote History is true. An elderly historian once said to me with a smirk that folklore is "a bunch of wicked lies." Although not significant lies, folklore has several. Important historical events are considered "historic," whereas folklore is tangential and superficial. Folk history is ludicrous because it has no meaningful relationship to the historian's chronicle of reality, whether

it be true or just irrelevant. The meticulous preservation of traditions in fragmentary form maintains the absurdity of folk history, which is its character as a lie or lying-like narrative. He also stated that folk history is entirely made up of insignificant details and confusing historical concepts (Glassie, 1987).

Despite having flaws and these arguments folklore and folktales provide us information on different perspective. When discussing the validity of oral tradition, Babatunde writes that with all experts in the field, we can reiterate that oral traditions are reliable and valuable sources for historians—sources that, while admittedly often challenging to handle, can provide insight into historical occurrences and trends. A source of historical information is oral tradition. There are many sources of information at the historian's disposal when writing history. Historians are particularly worried about the potential of learning about historical occurrences that are no longer accessible for examination or direct research. Historians must rely on any historical data pertaining to these previous events or people in order to learn more because the people or events they are interested in are no longer alive. A historical document or source is anything, tangible or immaterial, that testifies to the past. Folklore and folktales serve as storage for cultural memory, keeping alive wisdom, myths, and legends that may otherwise vanish into oblivion. These oral narratives, which are passed down from one generation to the next, are a crucial component of the identity of a community (Babatunde, 2015).

These narratives usually contain the shared experiences, views, and ideals of a culture and serve as a kind of cultural mirror reflecting a group's worldview (Dundes, 1965). The folklore of a community can help historians understand that community's history, collective memory, and elements in its past that shape its identity. Though folktales may not be a reliable source of historical facts, it might contain a factual basis in a story (Vansina, 1985), relating to events that have occurred and the social conditions under which they occurred. These narratives are a way of communicating an expression of experience, struggle, and success, and can be used for a hidden transcript of resistance against power (Scott, 1990). Indeed, folklore reflects the very ideals, manners, and objectives that existed during that era. Through the analysis that is conducted by looking at the stories and characters that are featured, it becomes possible to investigate existing social relations and how history has been actively processed into being remembered within collective memory (Portelli, 1991).

### **Interpreting History through a Folkloric Narrative**

The research proves the methodological power of folklore in historical research in that it analyses in detail three folklore: Raja Rasalu folklore in Punjab, Shri Badat folklore in Gilgit, and Bano Maryam folklore in Baltistan. These folklores, despite their thorough oral traditions and disguise with myths, still bear useful information regarding the societies, political systems, and culture of their corresponding geographical locations.

“The Raja Rasalu legend is a tale of the semi-legendary king of the area of Sialkot. Apart from the magical elements of fighting spirits, the tale seems to be a commentary on the realities of early medieval Punjab. Thus, a reading of politics, conflict resolution, administration of justice, and warfare can be discerned in the legend to reveal a certain structure of the state and the social norms that exist in a region in regard to politics and heroism.” N. Mohamed Here, the historian employs an act of critical reading to discern the legend as a representation of the state of politics in the region (Narula and Malhotra, 2023).

The legend of Shri Badat is well-known in the oral traditions of Gilgit Baltistan and Hunza. As a tyrant king who demands human sacrifices, the legend is significant. Some sources question the

historical existence of Shri Badat; but what is significant is that in the tale there are still retained pre-Islamic social conventions and cultural resistance to authoritarian control. This legend, when placed in its cultural setting, permits the scholar to distinguish between transformations in religious changes and cultural resistance. By comparing them with archaeological findings, researchers are able to separate symbolic themes to potentially distil an historical kernel (Muhammad, 1905).

The Balti folk song “Bano Maryam” is based on the struggles of a young girl called “Maryam” who is set to marry a poor deaf and dumb man. At that point in Baltistan, there was political unrest in the region. The Baltis had lost their independence, and the Dogra forces had captured “Skardu”, the capital of Baltistan. It was in accordance with the tough tribute system imposed by the ruler of Kashmir that Maryam was set to be sent off to “Kashmir” – a form of tribute. Although Maryam’s husband opposed this “undignified tradition”, he and his wife could agree because of “material considerations”. The song encodes Maryam’s journey from “Burge (Koshmara) Nullah” in Baltistan to “Kashmir”, in which she laments her separation from her husband, but at the same time demonstrates a composed attitude towards her fate. In Kashmir, she weaves “silk” and “manages silk cloth”. There’s also a mention of her departure, which is not opposed by the “people”, thereby not only emphasizing the tragedy of “Maryam” but also her peoples’ loss of “independence”. The story points out a critical juncture in the situation, which is when a shepherd is moved by her circumstances and brings it to the attention of local representatives and citizens of Skardu. It is on hearing this appeal by the Balti woman that the Baltis rallied together against the Dogra forces, which ultimately freed Maryam and later abandoned the payment of tribute altogether (Samreen, 2013). This folk tale is extremely important from a historical perspective and sheds a great deal of light on the social, historical, and cultural conditions in Baltistan during the time of Dogra domination. When placed in a historical perspective, an empirical reading of the situation can be given, and historians can decipher the symbols behind these occurrences, which highlight the underlying patterns of subjugation and resistance established in Baltistan.

Taken together, the case studies above illustrate how folk tales and folksongs are more than just entertainment. Rather, folklore represents a kind of collective memory. While a great deal of information can be gathered from folklore through a methodology of context, comparison, and interdisciplinary studies, folklore is inaccurate in terms of chronology or fact. Rather, folklore represents a kind of interpretive truth in terms of experience, belief, and perception.

### **Challenges to use Folklore in History Writing**

Folklore is a complex, but not so reliable, resource for writing historical texts. There are several methodological and conceptual issues in folklore that may cause problems for historical narrative. The initial, and, in my opinion, basic problem is that folklore is a subject with a complex and dynamic character. Oral traditions, myths, songs, and folklore themselves tend, in one way or another, to change with time. This means that folklore itself rarely manages to freeze a given event in a fixed and, in a sense, objective way, creating a problem for historians who try to distinguish between the symbol and the phenomenon itself. The second, and, in my opinion, not less pronounced, problem in folklore research is that folklore lacks a sense of chronology and authorship. In contrast with written sources, folklore itself rarely provides a clear-cut sense of chronology, and authors, in a proper sense, may not always be traced (Kumar and Parsad, 2023).

The questions of reliability and verification further reduce the immediate relevance of folklore as a historical record. Oral traditions stand as suspect sources of information, as they rest on memory and performance rather than on record. Links in terms of written records, archaeology, geographical, and material evidence must be established in verification of folklore; regrettably, this verification may not always be at hand, particularly in the case of literate cultures. Recording

folklore poses its own sets of problems. Misrepresentation, loss of meanings, translation, and subjective exposition of folklore collection occur. Besides, folklore is not always uniformly recorded. Stories in conformity with established ideologies and interests get retained in folklore, and others get lost in the annals of time, thus giving distorted records of the past. It should further be noted that cultural differentiation is a challenge in itself. This is so, since symbols, metaphor, and ritual in folklore embody meaning contextualized within specific cultures. This is a challenge since, without sufficient knowledge of culture; the historian is liable to be misled by oversimplification. In sum, the application of folklore in historical writing is a process of interdisciplinary specialization, wherein historical, folkloristic, anthropologic, and linguistic skills are applied. Despite this, folklore can be a valuable source for historical writing if approached by means of critical analytical interpretation within a contextual setting of other types of historical knowledge, particularly for the understanding of community perspectives not recorded within written historical knowledge (Kumar and Parsad, 2023).

## **Conclusion**

The analytic element of this research work makes it clear that folklore and folktales are imperative, but complex sources of historiography. The traditional method of historiographical approaches, predominantly based on written sources, does not conceive of the historical consciousness inherent in oral traditions. Following the example of this research, folklore is considered to be the repository of collective memory, values, and experience of the past, which do not exist in written records. Starting with the critical historiographical perspective, folktales, as illustrated in this research, include elements of the past, which relate to life and its ways, conflict and migration, and the world of beliefs. However, this particular issue clearly confirms that folklore as the source of history is the well from which one draws in methodological manner. Folktales, developed in terms of symbolism, oral traditions, and cultural interpretations, reference vaguely and inaccurately in terms of their chronological pattern and veracity. So, in conclusion, folklores and folktales are explanatory historical texts that help break the boundaries of writing histories in representation that were otherwise exclusive to elites. By employing such historical texts in an appropriate manner, there are innumerable ways in which historical accounts could be enriched for it would help tap the narratives of histories that were otherwise at the margins of histories.

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